



Πρόγραμμα  
για την Ενίσχυση της  
Διεπιστημονικής Έρευνας  
και Καινοτομίας



Εθνικό και  
Καποδιστριακό  
Πανεπιστήμιο Αθηνών

## Ερευνητικό Πρόγραμμα

**«Πρόσβαση στην Ανώτατη Εκπαίδευση.**

**Μελέτη των κοινωνικών, εκπαιδευτικών και θεσμικών διαστάσεων της  
ζήτησης τριτοβάθμιας εκπαίδευσης, των προβλημάτων και των πολιτικών  
ικανοποίησής της – μία Συγκριτική και εμπειρική προσέγγιση»**

**“Access to Higher Education.**

**A study of the social, educational and institutional dimensions  
of demand for and supply of higher education in Greece.  
Problems and policies in comparative-historical  
and empirical perspective.”**

**ΔΡΑΣΗ 7 - Μελέτη της διεθνούς εμπειρίας αναφορικά με το ζήτημα της  
πρόσβασης στην τριτοβάθμια εκπαίδευση**

Michael Tomlinson

**Access to Higher Education in England -  
a report on the social, educational and institutional  
dimensions of demand for and supply  
of higher education in England**

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Ευρωπαϊκή Ένωση  
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Με τη συγχρηματοδότηση της Ελλάδας και της Ευρωπαϊκής Ένωσης



ΕΥΡΩΠΑΪΚΟ ΚΟΙΝΩΝΙΚΟ ΤΑΜΕΙΟ

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# **Access to Higher Education in England – a report on the social, educational and institutional dimensions of demand for and supply of higher education in England**

## ***Report submitted to the Greek Education Ministry and European Union Support Framework***

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### **Introduction to higher education change and access in English HE: the shifting political, social and economic context**

This report examines the changing nature of access to Higher Education (HE) in England and the ways in which this has been shaped by the changing social, socio-economic and institutional context, which has had an impact on the supply of and demand for higher education in this context. Consideration of this changing context is significant given that the make-up of English society and economy more generally reflects a range of social and educational processes that bears strongly on students' educational achievements and aspirations, their progression through the educational system and beyond into the labour market. English society continues to be divided strongly on the basis of individuals' relative socio-economic status, which also reflect wider systemic disparities in the distribution of opportunity and economic outcomes across social groups (Goldthorpe and Mills, 2008; Halsey, 2013). Higher education has traditionally played a not insignificant role in this process, albeit within a policy climate that has sought to make the system more equal and open since the period of the 1960s. It is very clear that wider patterns of social and economic change also map onto structural and institutional changes in higher education, all of which have major permutations for the nature of access to the system, the types of students entering it and their experiences before, during and after it (Brennan et al, 2010; Scott, 2009).

Higher education's role in the reproduction of social inequalities has lessened somewhat by the expansion of the system over time. In the UK, participations rates have increase exponentially over a fifty year period, from 5 per cent in the early 1960s to just over forty per cent at present. At the start of the twenty-first century, higher education has become something of an automatic route for most academically-able and middle-class students. It has also become a more feasible option for those who may have historically given participation little consideration or found entry less accessible, as well as something of a default route for students who are unsure about alternative pathways. Increasing amounts of students from lower socio-economic groups have participated in higher education over the past twenty years. This has occurred in a context of more fluid access and more flexible forms of provision (for example part-time study, distance learning, Foundation Degree programmes, and the delivery of higher education in Further Education colleges).

However, the increased numbers participating in HE, including more students from socio-economic groups who have historically been under-represented in HE, has not necessarily diminished the predominately middle class composition of HE in England and other countries in the United Kingdom. *Increasing* participation is therefore clearly not the same thing as *widening* participation; while the former may refer to the absolute increase in student numbers over time, the latter would suggest that this is matched by a much wider demographic profile of students. This clearly isn't the case as this report will illustrate. Moreover, socio-economic disparities further manifest themselves in the relative socio-economic profile of students in different types of Higher Education Institutions (hereafter HEIs) in England. Differential socio-economic

participation between ‘old’ universities which are typically research-intensive, academically highly selective and of higher status, and ‘new’ universities which have lower entry grade requirements and offer more vocational provision, remain.

The expansion of the system and the need for better access routes to English HEIs has also had an economic undercurrent, and even key policies which have emphasised the social equity dimension to improved access have also acknowledged the beneficial economic trade-offs of increased student numbers. Politico-economic discourses linked to a high-skilled knowledge economy and international competition have emphasised the key economic role that higher education plays through the increase in graduates entering the economy. Thus, higher education’s dual function in providing both a social mobility passport and more efficient labour market has been high on the UK political agenda. Economically the United Kingdom has traditionally operated as a flexible, free-market economy and so the co-ordination between HE sector and the labour market has tended to be somewhat more loosely-coupled and open (Schomberg & Teichler, 2006). Compared to some of its European counterparts, which are characterized by more regulated, occupational labour markets, the inter-relationship between higher education the economy is more fluid and less based on providing specialised occupational training.

In UK policy, higher education has been increasingly depicted as a vehicle for economic growth and a lynchpin for innovation and high skills. Consequently, there has been significant policy drive to make English HEIs more attuned to the wider economy, as reflected in a raft of teaching and learning initiatives intended to maximise graduates’ economic performance and ‘employability’. These pressures can be seen to work in tandem with the growing marketization of English HE and the related expectation amongst policy-makers and students that higher education is a firm investment in a better future life. English HEIs now have to provide extensive ‘market information’ to prospective students, including programme quality and graduate employment rates (Brown, 2013). This is also linked to a policy framework in UK public services which is based on the New Public Management model, whereby stringent accountability and performance management levers are employed to increase HEIs’ accountability and responsiveness to their various stakeholders – which includes fee-paying students.

Demand for higher education in England is likely to continue so long as higher education is seen as a strong route towards better paid employment and enhanced life chances, and in a context of an expanding middle class in the UK. There is a consensus in UK higher education policy that the supply of graduates is matched by their economic demand and that the occupational structure continues to be sufficiently upgraded to accommodate an expanded graduate pool. At the same time, there is evidence to show significant levels of graduate unemployment and under-employment in the UK and that graduate supply may well be exceeding demand.

There are also wider debates that surround the reframing of the values and purposes of higher education in the context of a much more explicitly market-orientated system and how these, in turn, shape students’ own perception of higher education, their rationale for participating, and its potential role in their future lives. A considerable emphasis in HE policy has been placed on the enhancement of students’ vocational preparation and ‘employability’, together with the valorisation of increasingly instrumental and consumer-driven approaches to formal study. Such debates are important to analysis of access to HE in terms of how prospective students make choices and the extent to which a market system may serve to intensify inequalities between different types of students as a result of a more explicitly ranked system.

A number of key policy developments will be discussed throughout as these have a significant bearing on the nature of student access, mobility and opportunity. These include the formal transition from 'elite' to 'mass' higher education towards the latter part of the twentieth century; its move from a fully publically-funded and quasi-autonomous institution towards a part-public institution through the introduction, and gradual increase, of tuition fees; and the decline in state expenditure for the system. The report will tease out some of the main tensions that are evident in policies around access and widening participation in the context of what has been an explicitly market-driven policy framework in England over the past two to three decades.

This report will explore the changing nature of participation in higher education in England. Part 1 will explore the historical features of access to higher education in England and the UK, looking at the gradual shift from elite, exclusive forms of higher education to the current mass system. An overview will be provided of the structural changes to the system, as well as wider socio-economic changes relating to occupations and social class that have shaped the changing demand for higher education. It will review the main policy trajectories in this development and how specific policy measures have addressed the problem of student access and progression. Consideration will also be given to the wider social and economic context that also interacted with the move to mass HE.

Part 2 of the report will look at current debates around the need for improved access and its interplay with wider issues concerning the economic and social value of higher education. Debate continues over the efficacy of mass higher education as a high skill formation policy and the extent to which the increased supply of graduates is matched by genuine economic demand. This is occurring at a time of intense debate in the UK over the wider economic and social value of HE; who mainly benefits from HE; and ways of financially sustaining the systems. This section will review the public benefits and risks of increased participation in higher education at a time when the UK system has moved to a part-public system and become subject to increased market leveraging.

Part 3 examines the different rates of higher education, addressing the key issues of who does and does not participate in HE in the UK. While more 18-21 years olds are participating in higher education, there are still over half who choose not to and who progress to alternative educational or work-related pathways. This section will therefore examine the patterns of participation in HE in the context of wider sociological discussion of the nature and determinants of participation in order to explain why some groups of students enter HE and other choose not to. Drawing upon UK government statistical data, this analysis will explore the entry routes for different types of learners, and how this is shaped by socio-economic factors and earlier patterns of attainment. This part will also explore the impact that more recent policies, particularly the increase in fees, has had on participation rates and prospective students' decisions.

Part 4 will explore the range of policies that have tried to improve access to the system, but will also provide critical insight into the effectiveness of these and how they might come up against wider social and institutional factors. This section will examine more contemporary developments in access policy, focusing particularly on the period from the Labour Government (1997-2010) to the current Coalition Government's (2010- present) framework. The previous UK administration was strongly committed to increasing access to HE and expanding the system and so put in place a raft of measures to achieve this. The current UK administration, working under budgetary constraints, has a somewhat different agenda, including devolving access strategies to individual institutions. This section will explore contemporary policy measures around access and their likely impact on different learners and institutions. The last part of the

report will look the experience of non-traditional students in higher education and will relate this to the wider problem of student retention in higher education, an issue that is quite significant for access policy given that once students enter higher education they also need to be able progress through it in order for their initial access to have been successful. This will be illustrated by UK-based research on 'non-traditional' and 'at risk' students who have been central to the access agenda.

## **Part 1: The trajectory of the UK higher education system**

This section aims to detail the main trajectory of the English (and where appropriate UK) HE system over time, concentrating mainly on the period from the 1960s to the present day. The period since the 1960s has seen sustained growth of the sector, the expansion of institutions that award degrees, and the range of potential programmes of study offered to prospective students. These developments must be firstly seen in the context of an on-going policy agenda.

Prior to the Second World War and the emergence of a post-war welfare state in the UK, the English higher education system was confined to the presence of medieval and Victorian civic universities which were attended by under 5 per cent of the population. In the decades preceding the first wave of expansion in the 1960s, the UK established a new welfare state and witnessed a stronger policy commitment to the promotion of equality of opportunity. Educational policy at this time reflected these political aspirations as reflected in the raising of the school leaving age, the move towards non-selective comprehensive schools, and the promotion of more child-centered pedagogies within general schooling. It became evident during this period that more school leavers were suitably qualified to enter higher education and so the goal to utilize the wider 'pool of talent' towards better social and economic end became much more prominent in English educational policy.

A cornerstone in the expansion of higher education was the Robbins Report of 1963 which set out its vision of an expanded higher education system where access is much less contingent on a student's ascribed social status. A key policy goal in this report was the fulfilment of the overarching "Robbins Principle" which was based on the notion that university places "should be available to all who are qualified by ability and attainment to pursue them and who wish to do so". More specifically, four core objectives formed the basis of the report and the guiding principles for higher education in England, namely: instruction in skills suitable for work; the promotion of the powers of the mind; the advancement of learning; and the transmission of a common citizenry and culture. The Robbins report recommended the expansion of universities and granted university status to technical colleges.

The 1960s therefore saw the first wave of expansion through the then government's promotion of expansion of and a more inclusive agenda for accessing HE, leading to the gradual increase in participation to just under 15 per cent by the end of that decade. This was mainly the consequence of the introduction of some thirteen new universities, which were modelled on the existing civic universities, and the significant expansion of polytechnic institutions which, at that time, did not have degree-awarding powers and were under the jurisdiction of local authority control (Scott, 1995). The goal of these programmes was to provide students with a vocational grounding that would equip them for future occupations within an economy that was demanding increasing technical-level skills. In short, these new technical colleges accounted for much of the expansion during this period.

However, access to higher education at this period was still very much restricted and participation confined mainly to the same demographic of students who had participated

hitherto – namely, white, male, middle-class students who had typically either experienced selective Grammar school-based state-education or private education. Thus, participation in higher education was still based on highly selective entrance requirements, which made universities accessible to only the most academically high-achieving and universities continued to be built upon elite academic values. Moreover, the new polytechnics at this time were very much accorded a ‘second-tier’ status and so persistent social divisions in participation continued during the period from the 1960s to late 1970s. Whilst a small absolute increase in numbers of students from manual, working class backgrounds occurred, the highest absolute numbers were from the professional and managerial classes, increasing to about 70 per cent for this group during this period. The rhetorical promotion of equality of opportunity in higher education espoused in the Robbins report was therefore some way from being made a reality during the middle to latter decades of the twentieth century in English higher education (Shattock, 2011). Some notable progression in equality was evident, however, in the increased participation of female students during the first decades of expansion which saw a two-fold rise in the from the period of 1960s to 1980, even though female participation rates still fell behind males until the early part of the 1990s (Thomas, 1990).

Expansion rates stabilised from the 1970s to late 1980s, but the early part of the 1990s saw the next major wave of expansion, or what has often been referred to ‘massification’ of the UK HE system.

This followed on from the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act which saw the breaking of the former binary university and polytechnic divide, whereby polytechnics were granted full university status and degree-awarding powers and removed from local authority control. This period was also characterised by a renewed political commitment to higher education expansion by the Conservative government of the time, largely predicated on the belief that an expanded higher education system would meet fast-changing economic demands. The expansion of new universities offering programmes with more immediate vocational relevance was seen as one way of addressing this. This connected to related sets of higher education policy agendas that emphasised the importance of higher education in developing students’ enterprise and business-related skills, which was partly reflected in the growth of business and technology related programmes as well as curricula initiatives that were designed to enhance students’ commercial know-how (DES, 1991). It was the polytechnics who were at the forefront of the widening participation movement and who formed the closest links with further education colleges who provided ‘access courses’ as alternative pathways for students (largely mature students over 21) who had not undertaken A-levels, which were traditionally the main route to higher education.

This particular development in the trajectory of UK HE can also be seen in conjunction with wider structural changes taking place in the UK educational system and economy during this period. A salient feature was the expansion of the number of young people between the ages of 16-18 entering forms of post-compulsory training who might have may not have considered undertaking this during periods of relatively high youth employment (Roberts, 2009). The expansion of the post-compulsory education sector and the range of pathways that potentially leading to higher education meant that higher education has become a more viable option for young people.

In line with the unification of the English higher education system and the policy drive towards diversifying the HE sector, expansion of ‘new’ universities continued. These institutions were the main recipients of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, part-time and mature students. However, while there was an increase in the numbers studying the traditional

Bachelor's degrees in more established 'old' universities, this was not matched by a relative increase of students from lower socio-economic in these institutions.

The Dearing Report into Higher Education in 1997 was another important milestone in the development of mass higher education, as well as the subsequent funding arrangements that have shaped much recent policy. The report signalled a growing need in UK higher education to be more responsive to wider societal and economic needs, including the ever-changing profile of learners entering higher education. A major outcome of the Dearing Review into Higher Education was the introduction for the first time in UK Higher Education of tuition fee contributions from individual students, amounting to an up-front payment of £1,500 per annum for full-time students.

Other key policy developments from this report were the drive towards increasing the supply of provision, including part-time programmes and access pathways and the growth of Foundation-level degrees: degrees which are shorter in length to standard higher education degrees and are aimed at providing students with a basic grasp of a subject in order to prepare them for future study in that area or for future employment. Another outcome of the report was the expansion of degree programmes being offered in Further Education colleges which have traditionally offered programmes below degree-level (Parry, 2006). As Parry argues, much of this provision was based on the differentiation and diversification dimension of higher education expansion; and in the case of further education delivery of degree-level awards this is both supply and demand-based. On the supply side, this is a way of diversifying modes of provision that are alternative to the dominant mode of full-time study in a higher education institution. On the demand side, such provision has been taken to genuinely meet the needs of specific learners - for example geographically constrained, part-time learners who demand immediate transfer and exit qualifications. Thus, while students studying for degrees in Further Education colleges do not experience learning in a 'Higher Education' institution as such, they have more chances of accessing locally-delivered programmes that suit their immediate needs.

A somewhat clearer distinction within the sector has been between 'research-led' and 'teaching' institutions, which has become more explicit following the Department for Education and Skills' (2003) White Paper, *The Future of Higher Education*. This separation was partly based on a formal recognition of the differing institutional missions and priorities of different types of higher education and the relative levels of research or teaching-centred activities in them. This also reflected on the proportion of income each institution derived from research funding as well as institutions' profile and ranking on official state-directed research performance measures. An implicit sub-text to this report was the channelling of institutional effort towards different agendas: in the case of more traditional and research-driven institutions, the continued development of their research capacity in order to put them within range of international competitor institutions within the 'world class' ranking order.

For newer universities, the agenda was mainly around teaching, widening participation and the 'student experience'. Whilst this agenda in some ways reflected an attempt to establish a 'controlled reputational range' amongst universities, whereby there is a more managed diversification of universities based on what they represent and seek to achieve, this approach also has significant potential for reinforcing institutional divisions and status-differences (Scott, 2009). An important outcome of the 2003 White Paper was the increasing of the fee contribution students made to their studies, which from the autumn of 2006 saw full-time higher education students make a contribution of £3,500 per annum. However, unlike the previous fee arrangement, students paid this after graduation and it was contingent on them reaching a defined earnings threshold.



Towards the end of the first decade of the twentieth century, the fiscal pressures on Higher Education in England intensified in conjunction with new government-driven austerity measures to scale-back public expenditure. This also coincided with a new UK government who expressed an even more explicit ideological commitment to introducing more market competition and plurality into the system by placing more purchasing power on the part of prospective higher education students. The political rationale has been based on a classical economic liberalist orthodoxy that a more market driven system, based on purchaser discretion, will serve to ramp up quality and standards in UK higher education (Brown, 2013).

The Browne Review of Higher Education in 2010 recommended the raising of fees to a limit of £9,000, with the proviso that individual HEIs could flexibly adjust their fee level to meet anticipated demand needs. However, most English HEIs chose to charge the full amount. The increase in fees is intended to compensate for a reduction by some £1.1 billion over a two year period in the teaching grant that had been the core source of financial revenue for universities (Spending Review October 2010). A further justification for this fee increase was that those who most benefit from higher education, namely relatively higher earning graduates, should make the greatest financial contribution whilst also removing the blanket state subsidy for all (except the most high priority) subject areas.

Whilst this contentious policy development was seen to work to the disadvantage of less wealthy students, the government has continued to highlight the income-contingent nature of fee payment, the obligations of prestigious institutions to incentivise less privileged students entering higher education, and the fairly wide range of maintenance grants and loans offered to such students. At the same time, those leaving university can expect to accumulate considerable debt, which has been estimated at £59,100 (cited in the BBC <http://www.bbc.co.uk/go/em/fr/-/news/education-14488312>).

The move towards mass higher education, which has been based mainly on the expansion and diversification of the sector and the growth of pathways through to higher education, has not followed a clear trajectory. Consideration is also needed of the nature of difference and diversity in what has become a highly plural higher education system. As a number of authors have sought to illustrate (Scott, 2009, 1995; Parry, 2006) there is no simple distinction between elite and mass higher education. The current mass system has never been fully modelled on the elite system whereby the structure and form of elite English HE has more or less continued with simply more institutions and more students. The second is that the sheer heterogeneity of HEIs, the types of programmes and curricula they offer and the much broader demographic of students who are studying in English universities. The key point made by Scott is that while mass higher education may resemble little of the older system, an unintended consequence of its development has been to reinforce the 'elite' status of higher profile and prestigious English HEIs. To this extent, whilst a greater range and profiles of HEIs have emerged - and increasingly been tailored to different groups of student - quite a few have contained the features of the traditional elite universities of previous generation in both form and the type of student attending them. Scott's further point is that the so-called reputational range has potentially narrowed over time and that the formal functional distinctions between different universities have been over-ridden by distinctions in prestige, status and international standing. As we shall see in Part 3, this has major implication for the types of student who are able access these HEIs.

Although the difference between different 'types' of higher education institution has become more pronounced under a market-based mass higher education system, this has forced some newer institutions to embark upon a competitive catch-up. Scott (1995) refers to this as

‘progressive integration’ of different types of institutions and there has been noticeable patterns of convergence between different institutions – for example, new, former polytechnic, universities developing research centres and increasing their base for post-graduate research; and older research-led universities developing part-time and modular programmes. Yet the prevailing values within mass HE are still those from the elite system and newer institutions have either had to try and model themselves on more established universities in order to achieve some degree of parity.

Whilst some English HEIs have undergone a process of what some have described as ‘academic drift’, many newer institutions offer provision that has been seen to be potentially more attractive to new types of learners who have entered higher education via different pathways. Thus, it is not particularly accurate to see the distinction between older universities and the new (former polytechnic) universities as one between ‘academic’ and ‘vocational’ institutions, given that the most of the latter also offer purely academic programmes. However, more prominent in the newer English HEIs are programmes that are designed to have a much more vocationally-relevant orientation and link more closely to the world of work.

The notion of institutional *diversity* within an expanded HE system has been developed by Teichler (2007), and adapted by Brennan et al (2010), to describe the breadth and range of institutional profiles that exist within it. A distinction has been drawn between *horizontal* and *vertical* diversity to not only capture the varieties of institutional identities, but also HEIs’ relative positioning in a highly differentiated field. Horizontal diversity refers mainly to the nature and form of institutions, how they are organised, their size and the modes of study they offer and links to the external environment. Vertical diversity refers to relative status profile and prestige of the HEI, not only in terms of its formal ranking on state-measured outcomes like research and income-generation, but also its perceived historical profile and institutional capital. This can be significantly self-perpetuating if the prestige of an institution attracts a disproportionately higher calibre of learners and academics, and in turn strengthens the already its pre-existing academic stronghold.

While the vertical differentiation is prevalent across many European countries, for example German and French research institutions, it is particularly pronounced in the UK. The issue of ‘where’ a student has studied has a potentially stronger bearing on both a student’s university experience and subsequent outcomes than ‘what’ they have studied. Studies on graduate outcomes across Europe largely confirm this pattern (see Schomberg and Teichler, 2006) and this tends to feed through to how students and graduates themselves perceive the relationship between their study and its potential future utility and value. In many continental European countries, the ‘what’ aspects of horizontal differentiations are ascribed much importance, particularly when there are manifest linkages between a student’s field of study and their future occupation. It also implies that the linkages between a student’s field of study and their future are more formally transparent and demarcated.

In the UK, the ‘where’ dimension is clearly very important. Furthermore, in a ranked higher education system, *where* a student studied has quite a strong bearing on perceived value and quality of that student’s higher education. A ranked higher education market has an informal role in conferring relative added-value to a student’s higher education experience, irrespective of their actual pedagogic experiences. This, in turn, may frame students’ own perceptions of the quality of their experience, which may have more to do with reputational rather than pedagogic considerations. For instance, an increasing premium has been placed on students’ rating of teaching quality and arrangements through institutional and national-level surveys, the outcomes of which are intended to inform prospective students’ choices for entering different HEIs.

While there is some evidence to suggest that students may use such data to discriminate between similar profile institutions, this is not necessarily a significant determinate of choice (Brown, 2007). As will be explored later in this report, students' choice of institutions has consistently shown to be influenced by wider educational and cultural factors, including the anticipated compatibility they between the culture of their target institutions and their own cultural profile.

The relative status and horizontal differentiation between English HEIs has a not insignificant bearing on access to universities and the highly related issue of student choice. Much of the policy discourse on widening participation and improving access to higher education has been predicated on the notion that choice factors should not be too constrained and instead openly based on academic achievements. However in the UK, both choice behaviour and, to a large extent, patterns of achievement are shaped by a broad range of socio-cultural and demographic factors. The facade of a purportedly transparent meritocratic system in the UK continues to frame much policy rhetoric on the need for improved access and the subsequent opportunities that a mass system can generate for diverse groups of students.

## **Part 2: The case for expanding higher education**

The case for the expansion of English higher education largely centres around two fundamental issues: the potential role of higher education in economic growth and renewal and also its potential role in improving social mobility and opportunity. The first of these has gained considerable traction in higher education policy discourses, and was also evident in the Robbins report. This is predicated on a number of central themes. First is the changing economic landscape resulting from the decline in manufacturing and expansion of service industries and personnel professionalism. Secondly, and related to the first issue, is the application of classical economic theories to higher education that depict higher education as an investment that will generate propitious future private benefits to society and individuals. Thirdly, policy makers have emphasised the strong competitive imperatives to an expanded higher education system if the UK as a whole seeks to retain its position as a key economic player on the global stage, both through the production of highly-skilled home graduates and also attracting international talent. This issue is connected to the expanded international market within English universities, not only in terms of the considerable revenue source that international students bring, but also the wider added-value of international graduates in the economy (Maringe & Foskett, 2010).

The second major issue relates to higher education's role in providing a social mobility passport, which has been key in shaping policy around higher education expansion. The popular mantra of higher education being a 'right' and not a 'privilege' has often been applied in relation to this issue. An expanded higher education system is seen to be an inclusive one as it encompasses a much wider profile of learner who might have historically been excluded from the system. This has a strong social justice imperative, whereby an expanded higher education contributes to the fairer distribution of economic opportunities and the amelioration of enduring social inequalities that have traditionally resulted in marked differences in economic outcomes between social groups (SMCPC, 2009; 2013).

Given the traditional role of higher education in allocating individuals to rewarding occupational positions, it is seen as crucial that it is not the main preserve of higher social groups. Thus, stronger attention has been placed on its role in breaking such inequalities and offering transformative scope for less advantaged groups of learners. This issue also relates to the economic agenda in terms of the need to expand the so-called 'pool of talent' and the expansion of new occupational growth areas within the knowledge economy which require a wider talent base.

Another case for expanding the system has been framed around the potential public good value of higher education. One of the main criticisms of the increasing marketization and move towards a part-public HE system is that it undermines the core values that traditionally have been central to higher education (Collini, 2012). These values are closely connected to higher education's public good value, whereby benefits are transferred into the collective public sphere and via the enrichment of a nation's overall social health. Moreover, the public reach of higher education is potentially extensive and can serve many communities. Marginson (2011) has applied the notion of a non-rivalrous good to higher education given that its benefits are potentially open to many different constituencies in society, which may also include secondary flow-through effects in the form of wider societal knowledge, tacit skills transfer and improved citizenship.

### *Higher education, knowledge economy and skills*

The economic argument for expansion has been predicated on a widespread belief that most advanced economies have become knowledge-driven in their modes of production and consumption, and characterised by higher-skilled and more cognitive-intensive forms of labour (Brint, 2001). This is manifest mainly by a whole-scale upgrading of work within large sectors of the economy and a related shift from relatively low-skilled, production-based industries towards service-based that necessitate a wider range of skill-sets within a 'new communicative order' (Street, 2004). To this extent, the knowledge-based economy is dependent on the advanced educational knowledge of its workforce as the core drivers of economic growth are ideas, creativity and innovation. It is university graduates who typically possess types of advanced technical and tacit knowledge and skills that drive forward contemporary knowledge-intensive organization within the current economy. Higher education is therefore seen as central to the knowledge economy through the production of future graduate 'knowledge workers' whose exposure to higher learning environments and acquisition of intensive disciplinary knowledge has significant economic trade-off. Graduates not only know how to find and work with advanced knowledge, but also have the tools to engage in independent and continuous learning through the course of their careers.

The UK's Work Foundation report (2010) has shown that most job growth areas over the past 40 years involve 'knowledge work' compared with one-fifth in early 1970s – most jobs require level 5 qualifications or above, and most require the skills that graduates have acquired from higher education. In this changing context it is argued that preserving an elite cadre of professional elite drawn from an elite higher education system is no longer sustainable. Instead, it is seen as imperative that governments and individuals continue to invest in higher education in order to generate longer-term social and individual benefits. These issues also relate to the perceived role of higher education in regulating skills within the labour market. In UK skills policy, a core priority has been to increase the skills level of the workforce by increasing the qualification level that the workforce possesses. For instance, the Leitch Review (2006) of skills emphasised the importance of over 50 per cent of the population having a level 5 qualification (sub-degree-level or equivalent).

The dominant thinking around higher education's role in supporting the knowledge-based economy through the production of a skilled workforce has been informed strongly by classical economic conceptualisation on the relationship between formal education and the economy. The human capital framework advanced by prominent economists such as Becker (1993) have been very influential in setting the agenda for expansion and have informed much of the English policy discourse. Higher education is presented as an *investment* that will result in tangible

economic gains and enhanced productivity. Moreover, this posits that not only does the supply of individuals leaving the economy match the demand, but that this supply generates further demand as the productive capacity of the workforce increases. Labour economists such as Becker have typically referred to the ‘marginal product’ of university graduates, based on the notion that their additional skills are directly convertible into enhanced economic output. University-level knowledge and skills have a strong degree of value-added and increasingly a source of competitive advantage.

There is indeed some evidence to support the central tenets of this theorising, based on secondary data on the overall returns of UK university graduates (Future Track, 2012; Walker and Zhu, 2013), and this has also been supported by large-scale evidence across Europe (Schomberg and Teichler, 2006). This data, which typically draws upon large-scale and widely-distributed surveys or national labour force data, shows that *on average* graduates enjoy significantly better overall life-time earnings than those who have not graduated. This so-called ‘graduate premium’ is seen as a direct by-product of the greater economic opportunities that await graduates in the labour market and the opportunities to apply their knowledge to attain better jobs. Based on UK Labour Force Survey and British Household Panel survey which when combined, contain information about graduates’ degree subject, classification and institution of study, Walker and Zhu’s analysis of the difference between graduates and those whose highest qualifications are A-levels led them to estimate that the overall lifetime earnings differential for male graduates was £168k and for female graduates, £252k. They also showed that the type of degree classification a graduate attains carries significant earnings implication, with those attaining a ‘good’ degree classification (in the UK system a First Class degree classification or Upper Second classification) earning up to £85k and £76k more over their working lives for male and female graduates respectively. Similar outcomes were reported in the Future Track survey, conducted by a group of UK labour market analysts, which reported evidence of higher aggregate earnings for UK university graduates. This report, however, tracking longitudinal data of graduate earnings over time, also reported a 2% decline in graduate earnings over the past decade; a situation that may well have coincided with a more fragile economic context over the past five years.

#### *Critical perspectives: too many graduates leaving mass higher education*

Alternative analysis has tended to challenge the orthodox economic position of the case for expanding higher education. The main criticisms towards expansionist higher education policies has centred mainly on the alleged need for more graduates entering mass higher education and whether the economy can absorb them when they graduate (Keep & Mayhew, 2004; Wolf et al, 2006). This has resulted in what sceptics see as a policy framework that has conflated higher levels of qualification with better overall economic outcomes, based on what amounts to a false assumption about the nature of skills growth demand the role of higher education in meeting them. As Wolf et al (2006) have illustrated, a degree certification may amount to little more than an empty label if it contains little in the way of intrinsic labour market value or aid to either an individual’s labour market outcomes or the productivity of a workplace.

Keep & Mayhew (2004) argue that the development of mass higher education can be seen as part of a ‘supply-side’ trigger approach that is assumed to resolve many structural issues in the labour market itself, not least job quality, organizational structures and training opportunities. Moreover, the situation where nearly 50% of young people are choosing to enter higher education, and where higher education is framed as the only credible route to rewarding forms of employment, is likely to create a growing polarisation between those who have a higher education qualification and those who do not. This is ultimately to the detriment of educational

pathways that learners may choose to undertake instead of higher education, not least vocational pathways that may lead to semi-skilled employment. It also means that a degree-level qualification increasingly becomes a prerequisite entry to job areas which once might have accommodated prospective employees with vocational qualifications and related technical experience. Such individuals themselves may be 'trapped' into pursuing higher education in order to keep themselves on par with 'better qualified' graduates.

Further criticisms have highlighted the issue of equity in the labour market, even amongst the highly qualified. More recent analysis of multi-national companies' skills formation and recruitment practices shows evidence of increasing divisions between graduates in the scope they have for undertaking creative, discretionary and 'knowledge' work (Brown et al, 2011). While some graduates might be at the apex of innovation and high-skills knowledge hubs, many may be performing fairly standardised and routine forms of employment that, while requiring relative levels of working knowledge, are not as creative and knowledge-intensive as knowledge economy rhetoric purports. This research confirms the notion that in elite, top-end labour markets, graduate winners tend to be those with additional acquired assets, in the form of social capital and networks that propel them to top level positions, rather than simply the possession of an undergraduate degree. As this research also points out, many top-level employers subscribe to the 'war for talent' ideology which posits that there is a limited pool of talent and that finding and nurturing this talent is paramount for a company's competitive advantage.

These wider company-level patterns are also reflected in evidence on dispersed income returns amongst graduates (Green and Zhu, 2010). Thus research, such as that above, indicates a higher graduate dividend based on the attainment of higher qualifications has tended to take this to represent the graduate population as a whole. Also using Labour Force Survey data, Green and Zhu, point to significant variation amongst the top, middle and bottom earning graduates, indicating that UK graduates' labour market outcomes are far from uniform. At one level this reflects the sheer diversity of jobs that graduates enter, which inevitably attract different earnings premiums and rates of career progression. At another level, it points towards various education and social variables which may account for such differences, which may include the socio-economic background of the graduates, the subject and university they graduated in and the types of sector they've orientated towards. It is clearly evident that graduates in for-profit private sector jobs are much more likely to command higher wages than their public sector counterparts. The Future Track survey (2012) confirms these patterns by indicating that an increasing amount of graduates are entering non-graduate jobs for which a degree is not a necessity. This survey's findings also showed a higher wage return for graduates from more prestigious Russell Group universities, which the authors refer to as 'higher dividend institutions'. This itself may be attributable to the higher proportion of graduates from these institutions who have studied higher wage subjects such as law and medicine. It may also be shaped by the higher proportion of middle class graduates who are able to exploit their networks and additional social capital to negotiate entry to elite jobs.

A related issue here is that of graduate 'under-employment' which has been reported as an increasing labour market challenge and one that is very much at odds with the human capital understanding of worthwhile return on investment.

There is concern that in some occupational areas, and geographical regions, the supply of graduates has not kept pace with the availability of jobs and skills demands in the labour market (Felstead et al, 2007). Thus, if quite a large segment of the occupational structure is not sufficiently upgraded to accommodate an increased graduate pool then discernible mis-matches will prevail between graduates' existing skills (or skill potentials) and their utility in the job market.

As Scurry & Blenkinsopp (2011) discuss, there are both objective and subjective dimensions to graduate under-employment. The former are clearly evident in earnings shortfalls and vertical and horizontal mismatches between a graduate's level of education and training and their formal location within a job, which may also include their opportunities for career progression. If a graduate is manifestly working at an occupational grade that is below their educational level - for example, a business graduate as a store assistant - then there is likely to be a marked disconnect between what their higher education had equipped them for and its trade-off in the labour market. Labour Force Survey indicates that the percentage of recent UK graduates who completed their degree from the period of 2001-2011 who are in lower skilled work has increased by about 10% from the period from 2001-2011 (OSN, 2012).

### **Part 3: Patterns in access to HE**

#### *Sociological dimensions in patterns to access to Higher Education*

The overwhelming evidence on patterns of access to higher education indicates significant levels of differentiation and structural inequality in the levels to which individuals from different sections of English society participate in higher education (IPPR, 2013). The situation appears to be driven by various interlocking factors. The first is the class-divided nature of the English educational system which results in markedly differentiated educational opportunities and outcomes in formal compulsory education, which has significant impact on young people's subsequent learner trajectories. This relates to the second main issue of a highly divided academic and vocational educational system in England which does little to unify learners from different social background, and instead often tends to channel learners down fixed educational pathways (Spours and Hodgson, 2008). Third is the significantly higher proportion of learners from higher socio-economic backgrounds in higher education, which has traditionally been the final formal educational destination for relatively high-achieving learners. Fourth, and closely linked to the previous issue, is the growing institutional disparities within the English higher education system which have been reinforced by its move towards a market competition mode of delivery and the increasing internal differentiation in the overall ranking and status of institutions. This has served to reinforce institutional hierarchies and status divisions which are to some students' advantage more than others. Taken together, these factors have resulted in different rates of participation in higher education on the basis of learners' existing social and educational profiles, which also reflect different social composition of students within an increased 'ranked' UK higher education system.

Moreover, while the massification of English higher education is sometimes seen to represent an inclusive form of lifelong learning, entry to higher education is still based on a learner's existing qualifications. Thus, what a student formally achieves at the most significant exit point of formal compulsory education at sixteen will determine to a very large extent the scope they have for participating in further and higher education. More prestigious higher education institutions have higher overall entry requirements and therefore exercise much higher levels of selectivity over which students they admit. The tougher entry requirements of elite higher education institutions means that many universities can raise the threshold entry levels and include other admission criteria such as a candidate's performance at a pre-selection interview. The extent to which an institution is selective and exclusive has a significant bearing on its perceived level of quality and standing. The competitive nature of entry to English universities means that students who have succeed in entering the most exclusive and prestigious ones are conferred relatively high levels of status which are likely to stay with them on graduation (Power and Whitty, 2006).

However, whilst there is a selective element to higher education entry, the expansion of provision for post-compulsory and the growth in HE-level provisions means that there are more available routes into higher education for learners who have achieved below typical standard entry requirements. Yet formal achievement at school-level exit point is nonetheless a strong indicator of a learners' likely trajectory towards HE, and how likely they are to progress beyond compulsory and further education.

Any analysis of access to higher education needs to consider the determinants of participation in post-compulsory schooling and some of the key decision-making processes that are involved when learners decide (or not) to participate in HE. In the UK, there has been an extensive body of research over the past four decades that shows that young people's decisions are informed by a complex and interweaving set of educational, cultural and political factors (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997; Roberts, 2009). These factors play a powerful role in influencing whether participation in higher education is seen as both a desirable and a feasible future option, and the extent to which they might be prepared, or able, to make a so-called 'investment' in an extended 3-4 year period of study. This research also shows that the formation of individuals' rationalities and choices occur over significant periods of their educational careers, and are not based on simple decision-making episodes at the point before they might potentially enter higher education.

Sociological approaches to students' decision-making and participation therefore shed some important light on the wider determinants of participation in HE; moreover, they highlight that higher education policies that are designed to facilitate better access do not operate in isolation from wider patterns of social reproduction and influence that determine the likelihood of different groups of individuals entering higher education. These approaches have tended to be approached from either more macro-level perspectives which link patterns of participation to wider patterns of social mobility and the maintenance of social-economic divisions, or in meso- and micro-level approaches that examine social and behavioural dimensions to individuals' decisions.

The macro-level perspective is concerned with examining systemic forms of inequality and its links to pre-existing patterns of relative socio-economic advantage. This has explored how inequalities in participation in HE are maintained as a result of individuals from higher socio-economic position being both more propended and resourced to take up educational opportunities and use them to reinforce existing social advantage (Halsey 2013; Lucas, 2009). This has extended to analysis of the strategies and behaviours that those from advantaged socio-economic groups employ when trying to secure educational and economic advantage, which includes developing additional forms of social and cultural capital and generally being more adept at exploiting whatever opportunities the educational system affords them (Ball, 2003). Under a system of competitive meritocracy, where achievement in formal education leads to access to further educational and labour market rewards, learners from lower socio-economic backgrounds may have better chances of accessing rewards when they have achieved the same absolute attainment levels as their higher socio-economic counterparts. However, absolute attainment level has risen in parallel amongst learners from higher socio-economic backgrounds, which has also been matched by continued social demand for higher educational credentials (Lucas, 2009). This approach therefore highlights that achievement itself is largely determined by relative levels of social advantage in the first place and that meritocracy does not work on its own accord.

The more meso- and micro-level approach takes the analysis further by exploring how the wider social context, including individuals' ascribed socio-economic positions, influences their learning



trajectories and dispositions towards different forms of education or employment. This pays particular attention to the actual educational and social processes involved in shaping decision-making and individuals' lived experience of education. These experiences are potentially highly significant in determining how likely an individual might be to participate in higher education. They also bring into question the extent to which any choice behaviour amongst students is based on a formally rational decision and economic calculation. Analysis is instead shifted towards the socially constructed nature of decision making and the multitude of potential influences that bear upon a student's choice to enter higher education, not least those deriving from their immediate educational and cultural environs.

Gorard et al, (2006) argue that analysis of student access needs to consider the significance of *when* a student was born and *where* they were born as having explanatory value in terms of locating their personal trajectories and choices within a wider political and socio-economic milieu. The *when* issues relate to significant issues around the prevailing social structure of opportunity in terms of external conditions that may either facilitate or constrain choice, or what Roberts (2009) has termed as 'opportunity structures'. At a period when entry routes to higher education have become more extensive and fluid, as they have done in the UK over the past two decades, which is further set against a diminished 'youth labour market' which has encouraged higher participation in post-compulsory education, the more young people may seek higher education as an alternative pathway to employment. Temporal dimensions can also have relatively immediate and sudden constraining effects, particularly when they are consequences of a significant policy decision. An example of this is the capping of student places and the raising of entry requirements which occurred in English universities some three years ago, and which also coincided with a trebling of tuition fees from £3,500 to £9,000 from the autumn of 2012. The early indicators in England suggest that this is likely to affect groups of learners who have traditionally found higher education more difficult to access or who have not perceived much benefit in participating.

The *where* dimension also relates to these issues in terms of the more immediate cultural milieu of a learner having a profound impact on their formal and informal modes of socialisation and the ways their expectations around education and training are framed. Sociologically-orientated research has illustrated how young people's educational choices are both educationally- and contextually-mediated, mainly in terms of the ways in which learners use dominant cultural schemas or frames of reference to navigate pathways through the educational system and by interpreting what is the most appropriate course of future action (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997; Fevre et al, 1999; Foskett et al, 2004; Dyke et al, 2012). Individuals' socio-cultural location therefore provides a significant lens through which they frame the relative importance of participating in further and higher education.

The notion of learner trajectory is important here, particularly when it is related to the movement that individuals make through the educational system and the relative ease by which they might progress through different levels of education. Fevre et al (1999) illustrate that a key element in the shaping of individuals' learner trajectories is the types of learner identities that individuals develop, or what Bloomer and Hodkinson (2000) term 'learning careers'. Learner identities are based on individuals' relations to formal education which significantly shapes their self-perceptions as learners, and in turn, their attitudes towards learning and the significance it is accorded in their lives as a whole. It is these learner identities which can strongly influence the extent to which participation in further and higher education is seen as a desirable and realistic option, as well as the types of provisions and institutions they might seek. For some groups of learners, even accounting for academic potential, higher education remains well outside their aspirational radars which is compounded by the dominant expectations of their cultures.

This clearly extends to the ways in which learners make connections between immediate learning and their life as a whole, or more generally, the extent to which they view higher education as being of worthwhile future benefit. In England, there is clear evidence amongst individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds of 'functional avoidance' towards post-compulsory education, whereby learners may actively avoid participation in formal education (Fevre, 1999). There are likely to be many other factors that shape this, for example the perceived role of immediate employment in fulfilling immediate social and economic needs. In the case of learners from lower socio-economic backgrounds, attaining immediate formal employment is perceived as a means towards achieving an adult role and identity. Another related factor is the relative tendency amongst learners from different social background to orientate towards either academic or vocational pathways, and in England this has been clearly divided between social groups (Raffe, 2003; Hodgson and Spours, 2008). In the UK, vocational education has been the desired route for learners who have traditionally sought relevant forms of training to access semi-skilled forms of employment. However, this route has equally been avoided by middle class groups whose aspirations have been towards professional employment, for which higher education has been a pre-requisite.

The manifestation of academic and vocational divisions in the English education system in pre-university education clearly has significant impacts for access opportunities. Significant here is the preponderance of academic forms of provision in English universities and the stronger overall congruence between learners who have stronger 'academic' pre-university profiles and the modes of provision and educational tenets of most higher education institutions. Whilst the expansion of higher education in England has increased forms of vocational provision and led to a more diverse profile of undergraduate programmes, vocational provision still tends to be a minority and confined to specific institutions, and which tend to be lower-ranked (Hayward et al, 2008). As Hayward et al's research has shown, students who have embarked on a vocational pre-university pathway have tended to find relatively limited matches with their existing learning profiles and interests in most English higher education, and may therefore consequently struggle to adapt to a new academic environment. It should be noted that many of the new-wave universities initially modelled themselves on the academic structure of Oxbridge (Halsey, 1992), and that some new institutions which traditionally had a more vocational orientation have increasingly incorporated more academic programmes (Watson and Boden, 2002).

What students experience prior to entering HE and what they expect from it during it therefore has significant bearing on their choices. The relationship between individuals' socially constructed learner identities and their orientations towards further study, mode of provision and the sort of institution they wish to attend is therefore important in the analysis of access. The wider dimensions that shape this, in terms of social class, ethnicity and age, can help explain the different levels of participation in different types of higher education institutions, or indeed students' tendency not to choose at all. Research into students' choice of university has clearly shown how the perceptions prospective students have about a particular type of higher education institution can influence their actual choice of institution. A major factor here is students' anticipated level of academic and cultural fit with a prospective higher education institution, which is likely to steer them towards or away from certain institutions.

Reay et al's, (2006) and Archer et al's (2003) research into this aspect of student choice behaviour has provided strong evidence on the kinds of attitudes and social cognitions which underpin students' attitudes and orientations towards different universities. This research brings into question the rational market-led choice model advocated by UK policy makers which is predicated on students having the scope to make open and free choice based on rational

interpretation of appropriate market information. This research has illustrated that students' choice is very much determined by the pre-existing levels of social and cultural capital that students possess, which is itself based on their formative education and cultural socialisation. Furthermore, prospective students are biased towards particular 'types' of institution which is intimately linked to their own academic profile and the anticipated matching of that profile to a target institution. The institutional profile of an institution in terms of its academic and cultural make-up, the proportion of academic programmes compared to vocational ones, and the overall cultural feel of an institution is shown to play a considerable role in shaping what kinds of institutions students apply for. Reay and colleagues refer to this as the 'cognitive structures' of choice and which are based largely on the affective and subjective underpinnings that inform the meaning ascribed to participating in a specific type of institution.

Drawing upon a broad range of data with prospective HE students, their study illustrates the important ways in which socio-economic factors linked to students' learning biographies can shape their choice of university. Whilst choice has often been constructed as a rational response to objective opportunity structures, studies such as theirs have instead shown choice operates within clear parameters and is largely determined by individuals' own subjective opportunity structures. This has been illustrated by the tendency for students from lower socio-economic to negate their potential to study in more prestigious and more academically competitive higher education institutions and instead opt for institutions that are more aligned to their own cultural profiles. This research indicates that this may be the case for students who have sufficient potential to study at more prestigious English higher education institutions but choose not to study there, which itself may be based on a sense that they would not fit into the dominant institutional culture and habitus of these institutions.

It is clear therefore that very crucial processes occur prior to students entering higher education that exercise considerable influence on whether they choose to attend university and where they may attend. These may well be further mediated by what institutions themselves do in terms of their admission of students with different academic profiles. The key issue here centres on the extent to which prestigious, higher-entry higher education institutions admit suitably qualified students from social backgrounds who form a minority within their own institutional student demographic; more specifically, students from lower socio-economic backgrounds who have received a state education, or students from ethnic minority backgrounds. In England, entry to higher education is determined by the grades students attain, but prior to making a formal application they will need to base this on formally 'predicted' grades based on their achievement in their A-level study (or equivalent) to date.

At one level, this can be largely attributed to the possibility that students from lower socio-economic backgrounds are overall less likely to be predicted to attain the grades they need for entry into top English universities. But there may be some further institutional effects at work, including differential treatment or cultural bias negatively working against the admission of students from particular socio-economic or ethnic backgrounds. In England, entry to the top 'Russell Group' institutions is not only determined by formal grades but also performance in a rigorous interview that attempts to assess the intellectual and social calibre of students. This leaves open the potential for cultural effects that relate to how different applicants respond and how recruiters interpret the cultural profile and potential academic capability of an applicant. Thus, academically able students from lower socio-economic backgrounds might be perceived not to have the desired cultural fit for an institution, or at least are not sufficiently practised to negotiate this part of the admission. There has been some small-scale evidence to suggest that this has been the case for students in the most elite institutions.

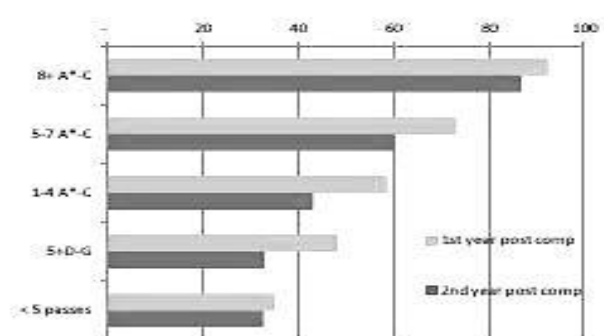
The next section aims to explore more fully some of the secondary data in the area of student access in order to provide a more evidential context to some of the salient sociological factors involved in access. It will explore some of the major difference between social groups in terms of access and entry to higher education and what these tell us about the relative supply of students to higher education.

### *Outline of differential rates of participation*

This report has already explored the important role that achievement in formal compulsory schooling has on the likelihood of a young person choosing to enter higher education. Much of the decision-making literature has considered the ways in which learners seek to navigate potential future education and training pathways at the crucial ‘turning points’ of leaving compulsory stages of schooling. However, these pathways can be significantly constrained by their achievement level at sixteen, and in England this is based on performance in the General Certificate for Secondary Education (GCSE). A student’s performance in this typically determines whether they are accepted onto A-level study, which in England continues to be the main entry-level qualification for higher education. Attainment of 5 GCSEs at grades A-C is still the main criteria by which a student can progress to A-level, but this in itself is not likely to predict how likely they are to succeed at A-level, and therefore how likely they are to progress to higher education.

At one level, this might be a more powerful explanation for why some young people negate the prospects of entering higher education. This may indeed be the first factor in establishing a potential poverty of aspiration and a deeply-engrained sense that HE ‘isn’t for them’. Figure 1 indicates that those students who do not have a strong GCSE attainment profile are far less likely to progress beyond the 2 years following the final point of compulsory education following their GCSE examination. It is clear that the highest attainers at GCSE level have up to 90 per cent chance of progression through the next phase of their education, typically A-level study and which then sets them up for the next stage, higher education. Those who have attained 1-4 A-C GCSEs are just over 40 per cent likely to progress beyond the second year into post-compulsory education. This is significant in light of subsequent decisions students make relating to study at higher education and the potential range of options that are likely to be open to them.

**Figure 1: on progression rates post-GCSE on the basis of level of attainment**



Source: DCSF: Statistical Bulletin 2009 – Youth Cohort Study and Longitudinal Study of Young People in England. The Activities and Experiences of Young People.

There are, of course, many determinants of attainment in the first instance, which often play a more substantial role than raw academic ability and whether attainment in the dominant mode of

school assessment accurately measures this. Socio-economic factors play a major role here, which tend to confirm well-established sociological knowledge about the relative advantages that parents from higher class backgrounds confer on their children, which translates to better overall educational achievement at the end of formal schooling (Department for Education, 2010). Table 1 clearly shows that the achievement gap between students from the highest and lowest socio-economic groups, which is nearly 40 per cent attainment gap between highest and lowest groups. Attainment at this stage is significant and is likely to have a major bearing upon whether a student will embark upon further study. However, it should be also be noted that the proportion of 18-20 year olds who enter higher education is little more than half the proportion who pass at least five GCSEs at A-C when they are 16 years old (Department for Education, 2010).

**Table 1: Percentage of Year 11 (final year of compulsory education) pupils gaining 5 or more GCSEs by parental occupation**

Higher management and professional	81
Lower management and professional	73
Intermediate	59
Skilled manual and lower supervisory	46
Routine	42

*Source:* Department for Children, Schools and Families (2008).

This differential attainment levels at GCSE level still does not take into account the even higher proportion of learners in this category achieving the highest overall grades (for example an A grade in core subjects of English, Mathematics and Sciences). For these learners, progression through to higher education is the most inevitable pathway, and therefore have a much higher likelihood of applying for and being accepted into higher education. Learners from the lowest socio-economic bracket, even if they achieve comparable GCSE scores, are far less likely to enter higher education (DFE, 2010). There are a number of likely educational and social factors at work, one being that students from higher social backgrounds are more adept at managing the transition to A-level study and have richer home resources to do so. This is likely to be reinforced by higher overall levels of parental aspiration that frames HE as the most desirable route to take. Thus, even when students from lower socio-economic backgrounds attain similar education outcomes at compulsory education they are far less likely than their higher socio-economic counterparts to go down a pathway towards higher education. Another factor at play here may be the fact that learners from lower socio-economic backgrounds may discard academic programmes on successfully completing their GCSE, opting instead for more vocational routes.

The most recent data indicates that in the United Kingdom around 37% of 18-20 years were participating in higher education in academic years of 2010-11, a further 10 % being mature students over 21 years old. The overall higher education participation rate increased by three per cent the following year which is explained by fewer students deferring their study to 2012 as a result of tuition fees increase to £9,000 that year (BIS, 2013). While a proportion of students may enter higher education at later stages after a significant delay between prior education and higher education, the rates amount of 18-19 entering the system is still the main indicator of participation rates.

These participation rates also need to be broken down on the basis of the different socio-economic profile of students in order to establish how evenly distributed participation is

amongst students across the UK as a whole. Information about students' socio-economic profiles is gleaned mainly from the information they provide about their parents' occupational positions on the UCAS (University & Colleges Admission Services) application form that students use when applying. This information on parents' occupation is placed into a social class index based on an occupational grading scheme that ranges from managerial/technical and service-level (classes i-iiiA) to semi-skilled, manual and low-skilled (classes iiiB-v). This is the most direct information about individual students' socio-economic profiles, although it relies on the accuracy of this information and how classifiable it is. Other measures of students' relative socio-economic status includes a breakdown of the proportion of students who have previously received a state (non-private) education compared to those who received private education, or the proportion of students in deprived socio-economic areas (including the number of students who attended schools where high numbers of students received free school meals). Each of these means of gathering information about students' socio-economic profile has limitations and relies on some degree of interpretation of how a specific occupation fits into a wider socio-economic banding. However, taken as whole, the data provides indicative patterns around the relative participation rates of different socio-economic groups; and perhaps unsurprisingly, the evidence points to some pronounced differences in participation between socio-economic groups.

The period from the early 1990 to early 2000s was characterised by a new wave of expansion and demand for higher education. This saw an exponential rise in student numbers across socio-economic groups (DFES, 2004). In the period from 1991-2002 the numbers of students from higher socio-economic groups increased from 35% to 50%, and likewise student numbers from lower socio-economic groups increased from 11% to 19%. This might indicate the growing proportion of students from lower socio-economic taking up the growing opportunities offered by that period's latest wave of expansion; in particular the growth of universities having degree-awarding powers and the expansion of new degree programmes. However, expansion of student numbers was still relatively greater amongst higher socio-economic students and the difference in participation between the groups by 2002 was 31%. Thus, far from a new wave of expansion equalising disparities in participation and 'opening up' the system almost exclusively to hitherto under-represented groups, it has been met by continued on-going demand amongst those who have traditionally always participated. This confirms established understanding that those from higher socio-economic background are better placed, and more propended, to take up any new opportunities that expansion of education affords (Lucas, 2009). The overall accommodation of more middle class learners into newer (post-1992) universities may also reflect the increasing 'academic drift' of some of these universities in their attempt to attract learners from higher socio-economic backgrounds.

The more recent data on participation level shows a narrowing in participation between socio-economic groups (see table 2 below): participation amongst students from higher socio-economic groups fell from 2002-2008 from 45% to 41% and rose amongst students from lower socio-economic groups from 18% to 21%, indicating a relatively difference fall of 20%. This has been welcomed as a positive signal that the continued expansion of higher education is finally being met with improved levels of social equality between socio-economic groups and a sustained increase in participation amongst lower socio-economic students. Such evidence is also taken as a positive indication of the success of educational policies that have improved the outcomes and aspirations of young people and raised awareness about the opportunities of participating in HE.

**Table 2 – Differences in participation amongst students on the basis of socio-economic background**

	National Statistics—Socio-Economic Classification (NS-SEC) class	
	1–3	4–7
2002/2003	45	18
2003/2004	42	18
2004/2005	42	18
2005/2006	44	20
2006/2007	41	20
2007/2008	41	21

*Source:* Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (2009).

However, some caution is needed when interpreting this apparent reduction in participation between socio-economic groups. The reduction in participation rates might reflect various phenomena, not least the persistent problems in finding precise ways of measuring students' class background, which is compounded by the fluid boundaries between different management/service-level occupations and a lack of disaggregated data in the differential participation between students within a one single socio-economic band. However, there has been indicative data that suggests there are significantly higher participation rates by students from the very top socio-economic band (i.e. higher management, class group 1) and those within the lower levels of this class band (i.e. intermediary, class group 3). If the middle classes are expanding, so too are the range of occupations within them, but this in turn means that both the economic return and levels of social influence within these occupations may widen. Similar levels of disaggregation in participation are needed for students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, given that there are marked occupational differences between those in class groups 4 (semi-skilled, lower managerial) and 7 (low skilled).

Therefore, a further interpretation is that the overall narrowing in the participation gap may have been more due to the relative decline amongst students within the 'middle' (i.e. class groups 3-4) than a describable equalisation of opportunity between the highest and lowest socio-economic groups per se. This again can be seen to reflect wider social and economic trends. In the UK labour market context, the role of higher education in accessing what have traditionally been seen as elite, high reward and high status socio-economic jobs has declined. The paradox is that the inflationary rise in higher education degrees is declining their exchange value. Moreover, this is occurring when the costs involved in participating in higher education have dramatically increased through tuition fees. Thus, the relative decline in participation might be attributable to those within the aspiring middle classes interpreting and responding to these changes by weighing-up the benefits and the value of participating and whether the higher level of investment is warranted. Exploring the specific educational factors (supply-side, e.g. qualification types, degree classification, skills levels) or labour market effects (demand-side, i.e. efficient job-assignment, skills utilisation) that further explain this is beyond the scope of this report. But significant for the present analysis is the ways these different outcomes may feed through into students' and their parents' perceptions of whether it is worth participating in higher education, which might explain various fluctuations in participation during different time periods.

At the same time, however, higher education continues to channel some groups of individuals into these types of jobs, but mainly those who have received elite forms of compulsory and



higher education (Hussain et al, 2008). It is these groups of students who are likely to continue to participate and who continue to receive higher levels of familial expectations to do so.

Difference in participation can be extended to where students choose to study, or are at least accepted entrance to. The ‘where’ factors discussed earlier in relation to influencing students’ educational progression are likely to significantly shape what type of institution students find themselves attending. This, in turn, raises major issues for access to different types of higher education institution. The evidence clearly points to major socio-economic differences in terms of where students study based on the relative socio-economic make-up of students at different English universities. Quite starkly, this evidence shows that the proportion of students from higher socio-economic backgrounds is considerably higher in prestigious HEIs and that there has been very little growth in the number of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds at these institutions over time (Sutton Trust, 2010; SMCP, 2013). While this relates back to the fundamental of the impact of prior attainment on subsequent educational outcomes, it also raises significant issues around the role that HEIs plays in reproducing these patterns. Access to HE not only entails a set of institutional arrangements that covers the formal technical administrative measures an individual higher education institution puts in place to facilitate the process, but also institutional processes of selection and decision making around different candidates. Table 3, drawn on evidence from the Higher Education Statistics Agency, outlines some of these differences. Figure 4 also shows the relatively low proportion of students from lower socio-economic group in prestigious Russell Group institutions. Conversely, the majority of students from the lowest socio-economic groupings, manual to low-skilled occupations, are in newer post-1992 institutions which tend have lower entry points.

**Table 3 – Social Background of Young Full-Time Undergraduate Entrants to Russell Group Institutions**

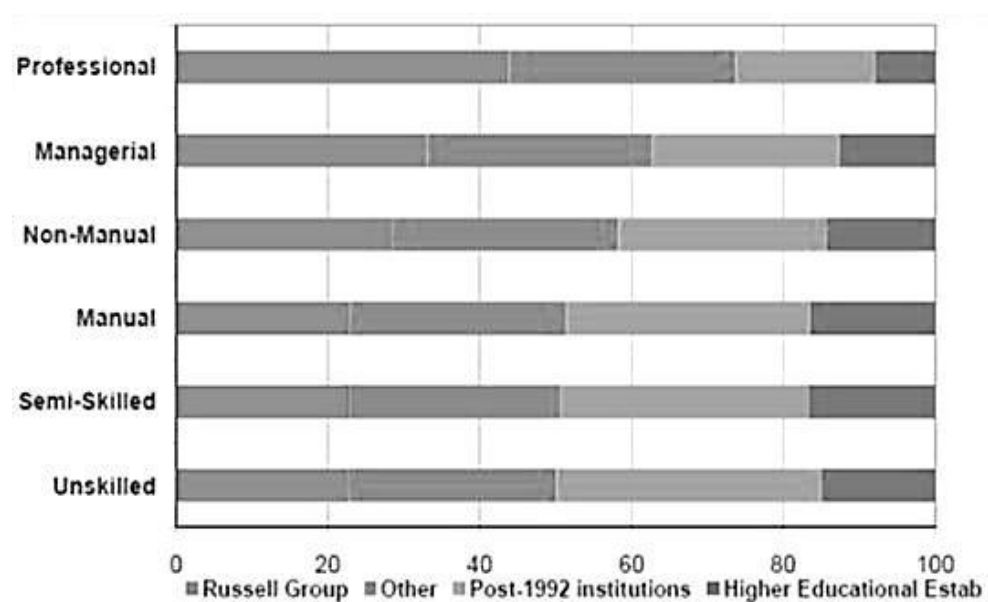
Institution	2002/03		2011/12		Change 2002/03-2011/12 percentage points (number)	
	% State educated	% NS-SEC 4-7	% State educated	% NS-SEC 4-7	% State educated	% NS-SEC 4-7
Birmingham	78.9% (3,523)	22.1% (987)	76.1% (3,497)	21.2% (974)	-2.8% (-26)	-0.9% (-13)
Bristol	63.8% (1,742)	13.7% (374)	59.9% (1,758)	13.0% (382)	-3.9% (+16)	-0.7% (+8)
Cambridge	57.6% (1,716)	11.3% (337)	57.9% (1,534)	10.3% (273)	0.3% (-182)	-1.0% (-64)
Cardiff	85.2% (3,148)	22.6% (835)	83.0% (3,254)	19.7% (772)	-2.2% (+105)	-2.9% (-63)
Durham	68.4% (2,151)	15.1% (475)	59.2% (1,749)	13.5% (399)	-9.2% (-402)	-1.6% (-76)
Edinburgh	65.7% (2,194)	17.8% (595)	70.3% (2,004)	16.5% (470)	4.6% (-191)	-1.3% (-124)
Exeter	67.1% (1,560)	15.0% (349)	67.4% (2,194)	15.2% (495)	0.3% (+634)	0.2% (+146)
Glasgow	89.2% (3,162)	22.9% (812)	87.8% (2,353)	20.5% (549)	-1.4% (-809)	-2.4% (-262)
Imperial	62.8% (898)	17.9% (256)	62.7% (821)	15.5% (203)	-0.1% (-77)	-2.4% (-53)
King's	70.3% (1,758)	22.8% (570)	70.7% (1,598)	22.6% (511)	0.4% (-160)	-0.2% (-59)
Leeds	76.7% (4,583)	19.9% (1,189)	72.9% (4,268)	18.4% (1,077)	-3.8% (-315)	-1.5% (-112)
Liverpool	86.2% (2,991)	25.2% (874)	87.6% (3,013)	22.0% (757)	1.4% (+22)	-3.2% (-118)
LSE	66.1% (453)	18.0% (123)	69.1% (473)	18.8% (129)	3.0% (+20)	0.8% (+5)
Manchester	79.9% (3,639)	21.7% (988)	77.0% (4,120)	20.4% (1,091)	-2.9% (+480)	-1.3% (+103)
Newcastle	73.8% (2,225)	20.4% (615)	69.2% (2,432)	19.5% (685)	-4.6% (+207)	-0.9% (+70)
Nottingham	72.9% (3,368)	16.9% (781)	73.0% (3,913)	19.1% (1,024)	0.1% (+545)	2.2% (+243)
Oxford	55.4% (1,651)	11.0% (328)	57.7% (1,552)	11.0% (296)	2.3% (-99)	0.0% (-32)
Queen Mary's	84.8% (1,420)	35.1% (588)	83.7% (2,005)	32.4% (776)	-1.1% (+584)	-2.7% (+188)
Queen's Belfast	99.8% (3,179)	36.0% (1,147)	97.6% (3,157)	31.4% (1,016)	-2.2% (-21)	-4.6% (-131)
Sheffield	82.6% (3,341)	19.0% (769)	83.7% (3,444)	17.8% (732)	1.1% (+103)	-1.2% (-36)
Southampton	80.9% (2,500)	18.6% (575)	83.8% (3,008)	19.2% (689)	2.9% (+509)	0.6% (+115)
UCL	61.4% (1,501)	17.8% (435)	64.7% (1,333)	16.3% (336)	3.3% (-168)	-1.5% (-99)
Warwick	77.8% (1,898)	17.8% (434)	73.3% (1,887)	18.6% (479)	-4.5% (-11)	0.8% (+45)
York	79.3% (1,471)	17.7% (328)	77.3% (2,168)	18.6% (522)	-2.0% (+697)	0.9% (+193)
<b>Russell Group</b>	<b>75.6% (56,073)</b>	<b>19.9% (14,763)</b>	<b>74.6% (57,537)</b>	<b>19.0% (14,637)</b>	<b>-0.9% (+1,464)</b>	<b>-0.9% (-126)</b>



Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency, *Performance Indicators in Higher Education in the United Kingdom: Widening Participation of Under-Represented Groups*, Table 1b, 2013.

The most notable feature here is the relatively low proportion of students from lower socio-economic groups (4-7), and in three of England's most prestigious institutions, Cambridge, Oxford and Bristol, this is just over double figures. But it also shows that the overall percentage of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds in the most prestigious UK institutions has declined over the past decade by almost 1 per cent (19.9% to 19.0% in the period from 2002-03-2010/11). It also shows an increase in the proportion of students entering these institutions who have received private education. There may be a number of further explanations as to why these marked differences are occurring, beyond the obvious class reproduction effects. One might be a greater tendency amongst potentially high-achieving lower socio-economic students to not consider applying to these institutions based on lower confidence and expectations, which might be compounded by a lack of guidance and information from significant others. Another explanation could be around institutional effects in terms of potential biases amongst those who regulate entry to an institution, namely admissions tutors. A consequence of grade inflation amongst school and college leavers, coupled with higher demand for entrance to elite institutions, has meant that entrance criteria is no longer based predominately on a candidate's grades. The formal university entrance interview, which entails prospective entrants having to demonstrate their academic and cultural capabilities, may be to the disadvantage to students from lower socio-economic backgrounds who might be unfamiliar and less confident in such situations, and which may conform to admission gate-keepers' cultural biases.

**Figure 2: Attendance at different types of university by socio-economic group**



Source: Machin et al (2009)

Recent work by Boliver (2013) has also shown patterns amongst ethnic minority students, who again have a much lower proportion of students attending more prestigious higher education institutions. This research has shown that, while more ethnic minority students attend

universities relative to their white student counterparts, they are far less likely to be admitted to prestigious 'Russell Group' institutions. Whilst the proportion of ethnic minority students applying for these institutions may be lower, there are still measurably lower acceptance rates amongst those who do apply. This admission inequality also appears to increase, rather than decline, as the ethnic minority share of applicants increases, implying an implicit mental quota regulation on the part of university admissions.

#### *Impact of recent fee changes from 2012 on students' participation in higher education*

Concerns have been raised that the introduction of higher fees would deter entry to higher education and that declining student numbers would not recover greatly over the longer-term, especially amongst lower socio-economic students. The evidence indicates a drop in entrants to higher education in 2012 when higher fees were introduced by some 12 per cent from the previous year from 398,000 entrants to 351,000 (HEFCE, 2013). This, however, has been largely attributed to the higher proportion of students choosing to enter higher education directly in 2011, instead of deferring for a year – a decision which would have meant them entering higher education at a time when fees trebled. There was a similar initial dip during the year of the earlier fee rise in 2006, but this has proven to be transitory as applications and entrance numbers were largely stable in the subsequent years. Evidence suggests that 2013-14 entry levels have returned to the level they were in 2010 and have risen by some 3 per cent from the previous year.

Whilst the figures imply that the increase in fees has not deterred potential students from entering higher education, there have been some discernible impacts on part-time and mature students at both undergraduate and postgraduate level (HEFCE, 2013). Whilst overall participation amongst part-time students on undergraduate courses has been declining significantly since 2010, there are concerns that the 2012 fee increase has compounded these patterns. A number of key factors might explain this pattern, including the fact that part-time students have mainly been mature students and/or in employment, a proportion of whom may receive funding from their employer. It is likely that both this type of student and their employer are increasingly questioning whether participation in higher education is worth the investment compared to the more flexible scope and benefits that a full-time programme might carry. Such students may also be more debt averse and less prepared to make the investment. In the context of changing funding regimes, there has also been a shift from stand-alone, modular learning which students may use to acquire accreditation of learning to whole qualification. Data from HESA supports these trends: the highest proportion of part-time students are from more disadvantaged backgrounds and are likely to have both child-care and employment responsibilities. A decline in participation amongst part-time students therefore means that one group of non-traditional learners who have been central to the access policy agenda are increasingly less likely to attend higher education. In addition to part-time student numbers declining, applications from mature students fell from 2011-12 and 2012-13 by 7.1 % suggesting that the changing fee policy landscape is being felt more acutely by individuals for whom investment in higher education carries more uncertainties and risks (HEFCE, 2013).

There is some evidence to suggest some students' choice of subject may be influenced by the increase fees and prevailing concerns that students receive equitable employment outcomes on graduating. On the whole, there has been a slight increase in students choosing STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) subjects ahead of Humanities, although these movements are fairly nominal at this stage. One notable decline has been students choosing Modern Languages, which for 2012 fell by some 14% (HECFE, 2013), indicating that students are responding to the overall labour market prospects for graduates from these areas.

Primary research with school and college leavers and students in university has begun to explore how young people make sense of and respond to the changing UK financial landscape in HE, and how this is shaping their attitudes towards participating in higher education (Dyke et al, 2012; Tomlinson, 2013). Dyke and colleagues surveyed the views and decision making of college students in the South of England who were in the process of considering applying to higher education and who would have entered during the first year of higher fees. Their study found clear evidence that around 80% still intended to go to university and that participating in university was a risk many were prepared to take. Many of their respondents had internalised the narrative of better opportunities and higher earnings: whilst the wider social and economic advantages were seen as abstract gains, they were worth making the investment. The fact that fee re-payments were aligned to future earnings and that students received fee loans to cover their living costs also buffered their anxieties of experiencing immediate hardships. While there appear to be general anxieties about the fee increases, the majority of students appear reconciled to this reality and likened future fee repayments to most other forms of future outgoing and debt that they would experience. This study therefore illustrates that increased fees are not having the detrimental impact on participation for traditional 18-21 year olds. However, their study did show that it is likely to influence where they study as over half their respondents choose to live in a fairly short commuting distance radius from their family homes, and which indicates that more students may be studying from home over time.

In a similar study, Tomlinson (2013) looked at the perspectives of students in higher education on their decisions and approaches to higher education, addressing the wider issue of whether contemporary students are adopting largely utilitarian values and perceiving higher education to be a commodity. Drawing upon interview data with 60 HE students across a range of UK HEIs, the study found that higher education was still perceived as a worthwhile investment and a manageable risk that would result in better overall life chances. One of the consequences of higher fees for students in England was a growing concern to maximise their outcomes and to enhance their future employability ahead of less qualified learners. This indicates that demand for higher education is still strong for a core body of students and their families, although this is accompanied by a prevailing sense that the higher education system needs to be more responsive to students' needs in order to justify what they see as their own subsidising of the system. The route through to higher education is still fairly robust for many students: those students for whom higher education is part of their educational trajectories, increase fees do not appear to be a major deterrent in applying for higher education. But this also appears to support evidence that those that students from lower socio-economic groups are also not significantly deterred. Indeed, some of the students from lower socio-economic backgrounds in Tomlinson's study saw higher education as a route to better social and economic opportunities that were denied to their parents, and that future debt would be offset by better earnings and job market prospects. For those students who had originally intended to come to university, which forms part of their on-going learner trajectories, fees increases have depleted their overall intention to enter higher education. The evidence suggests that, while there have been some short-term impacts of higher fees on students' decisions, it is not significantly constraining prospective students' choices. Some further research is needed, however, on its impact of fee changes on lower socio-economic and part-time students.

#### **Part 4: Policies to promote fairer access**

In light of the evident disparities in participation, there has been quite an extensive range of policy interventions across the UK to make access to higher education fairer and easier. This was indeed a key HE policy priority of the UK's Labour government from the late 1990s who established a regulatory body called the Office for Fair Access and whose remit was to ensure

that HEIs abide with expectations that a larger proportion of under-represented groups entered higher education. Much of the interventions have been based on raising the awareness of higher education amongst these marginalised groups and making the prospects of entering more realistic. These interventions were centred on breaking down what have typically been seen as 'barriers' to higher education; once these barriers have been identified they can be removed. Such barriers, as Gorard et al (2006) outline, are likely to entail a range of situational, institutional and dispositional barriers. Situational barriers may include things such as distance from an institution of study and personal circumstance, whereas institutional barriers relate to what HEIs have in place that might facilitate or constrain access, including admissions processes and the ways in which provision is structured. Dispositional barriers are probably the most difficult to break down given, as earlier discussed, that they are based on deep-seated values and motivations about further study and the overall value of participating in higher education. If a prospective student harbours a deep-seated perception that higher education 'is not for them' the likelihood of them applying in the first instance may be quite slim.

In a similar vein, Thomas & Quinn (2007) outline three different approaches that might need to be applied in developing institutional-level policy interventions that can be used to make HE more accessible and desirable to prospective students. Each of these has relative strengths and merits. The first is the 'academic' approach which is based on breaking down deeply-held perceptions that a prospective student has about their potential for entering higher education, which might be also be based on a lack of aspiration and information. Thus, a prospective student may preclude the various opportunities that are available to them, including a higher education programme to which they might be suited. This approach is, however, largely based on facilitating better knowledge and information and re-working a student's attitudes and beliefs before a student enters higher education, rather than making significant changes to the nature of provision in higher education. Consequently, a student's real needs may not properly be met when they enter higher education, leading to a considerable degree of disaffection and then withdrawal from a course.

The second approach is the 'utilitarian' model and is premised on presenting higher education as economically relevant and beneficial to certain students. While this has become the dominant tenor in so much of higher education policy, it may be particularly salient for groups of learners for whom participating in HE might be perceived as financially risky and who value its economic outcomes far more than receiving a traditional liberal education. Such an approach calls for the further development of more work-based and work credit-based programmes and for student skills and employability to be much more foregrounded in the information students received about a particular programme. The third approach, the 'transformative' approach, concerns radically flexibilising and adapting higher education cultures and forms of provision so that a more inclusive climate is offered to students, including using different entry criteria for different sets of learners, taking into consideration contextual factors in students' background, where they have previously studied. This is inevitably challenging for many HEIs given, as has been discussed earlier, the over-whelming middle class composition and culture of higher education, which includes academics who have traditionally tailored their pedagogies and practices towards more traditional types of student.

The policy agenda of improving access to higher education became particularly prominent in the latter part of the 1990s under the Labour government of this period. The influential Dearing Report not only had HE funding and graduate employability as its key policy flagship, but also widening participation. The most significant policy initiative to follow this report was the *Aim Higher* programme which was about raising the profile of higher education to under-represented groups, including their awareness of higher education, aspirations and attainment. As part of this

initiative, a number of 'outreach' programmes were introduced, including visits to low participation schools and colleges by university students and academics to convey potentially useful information to these students about university and the options open to them. In addition, existing university students from lower socio-economic background provided mentoring and guidance to prospective students, as well partnerships between schools and universities that included summer schools and evening class.

There has been some evidence of success with this initiative, including increased awareness amongst lower socio-economic learners who might have dismissed higher education altogether as a feasible option, as well as raising some of these learners' overall GCSE scores (Passey and Morris, 2010; HEFCE, 2010). The positive outcomes of this initiative were seen to result from the commitment and enthusiasm of those involved in the programme, many of whom would have had strong commitment to the inclusion agenda as well as the strong levels of co-ordination between universities, schools and colleges which allowed for a more 'hands-on' approach to guiding less advantaged learners. The overall effect was therefore to increase learners' confidence in their own ability and higher education potential, as well as clear and targeted guidance about what they needed to achieve for entry and how to go about applying. However, the overall efficacy of this initiative on increasing actual levels of participation has not proved particularly conclusive, partly because many of the measures were on students' actual level of aspirations rather than their actual progression to university.

More recently, the current Conservative-led coalition government have dismantled the *Aim Higher* initiative based on what was perceived to be limited efficacy of the programme in promoting widening participation and the costs of maintaining its related activities. The current government's emphasis has been on devolving responsibility to individual institutions themselves for enhancing access by stipulating an official 'access agreement' that outlines their strategies for improving access amongst under-represented groups. This is then over-seen by the Office for Fair Access (OFFA). This is mainly about establishing what an individual institution puts in place to ensure that students from under-represented groups are not discouraged from applying and will also include the amount of fee waivers it offers to students whose parental income falls below the national average. If an institution's access agreement or measures on improving access are not met, they can be financially penalised. The Institute of Public Policy Research's (2013) report set out some potential ways forward in improving access to students who continue to experience difficulty accessing HE. These include: continuing outreach programmes which have a more collaborative approach between universities within a single region; using contextual data that takes into consideration prospective students' relative levels of socio-economic disadvantage when deciding their entry to an institution; and the enhancement of vocational forms of HE, delivered in the further education sector.

## **Part 5: Experiences of non-traditional students in HE and retention challenges**

A significant issue around access to higher education is the overall chance of students remaining in higher education once they have been admitted. Thus, while the processes by which a student chooses to study in higher education are significant, as are the educational and institutional factors that may enable or constrain this, also important are the initial experiences and whether these might significantly impact on whether they continue or drop-out. There is no shared way of approaching student retention in English higher education and a range of different terms have been used to approach this wider problem, As Jones (2008) discusses:

*A wide range of terms is used in both the UK and internationally to describe retention and its opposite. Some tend to emphasise what might be termed the student dimension, e.g. 'persistence', 'withdrawal' and*

*'student success'. By contrast, others focus on the place (e.g. retained within an institution) or the system (e.g. graduation rates) and then the responsibility shifts to either the institution or government. (Jones, 2008, p.1)*

The extent to which a student's decision to withdraw from higher education is determined by individual rather than institutional factors has often been discussed in relation to retention, but the two may also be conjoined. The former are likely to stem from students' lack of motivation, ill-informed choices regarding programme and/or institution, or a lack of overall academic suitability and aptitude. Yet all of these issues may to some degree be mediated by the relative levels of support an institution provides and how conducive its climate is for sustaining a learner's engagement. More recent attention has been focused on learners who are seen as being at a higher risk, and for whom studying in HE might have been perceived to be more challenging or less desirable in the first instance.

Merrill et al's (2009) research has illustrated the importance of students' level of 'integration' and 'assimilation' into the institution at which they have been accepted. This is largely based on how a student may respond to the academic and social structures of an institution and perceive it to be congruent with their own values and cultural make-up, as well as how prepared they are to adapt to whatever challenges this presents and which entails shifting personal dispositions. The extent to which students can become integrated into a higher education environment will also largely reflect the level by which they can consciously meet the explicit institutional expectations and standards that are set by a HEI and which are likely to include fulfilling academic thresholds. For some groups of learners who have not been so primed for higher education study, for example those who have chosen a vocational pathway into higher education, the task of overcoming such 'transitional hurdles' may be particularly evident. Research exploring the initial experiences of students who have chosen to study academic subjects but who have entered HE via vocational routes, has shown that such students have experienced more challenges in meeting the academic criteria of their new programmes (Hayward et al, 2008). This is mainly a result of experiencing a less structured learning environment, new forms of assessment that may be less codified, and academic content that is framed in an exclusively abstract way.

Earlier research into non-traditional HE students' experiences of transiting to HE coincided with the widening participation policy agenda and was aimed at exploring, much more qualitatively, the lived experiences of the 'new' type of student and the ways in which they respond to being in a new environment which is culturally discontinuous from their previous learning environments (Reay et al, 2002; Leathwood and O' Connell, 2003). This has generated very rich and insightful data on how such students make sense of and respond to an educational context that might have very little in common with the 'home' cultures into which they have been acculturated prior to entering. This research engaged also with the social and cultural experiences of students before entering higher education and how this framed their experiences when in it. The so-called cultural baggage that students bring into higher education has a not insignificant bearing on the ways in which they respond to a different setting, as well as their anticipated progression through the course of their studies.

The evidence points to some considerable structural and institutional impediments that non-traditional students experience when adapting to a new educational environment, a lot of which may derive from a deep-seated feeling of cultural alienation. Leathwood and O' Connell's research into non-traditional students at a new higher education institution highlights this vividly: many of the non-traditional students in their study experienced continued challenges with finances and balancing formal study with paid employment. In the case of mature female students, this also entailed balancing study with childcare responsibilities. Furthermore, students

in their study expressed anxieties about a lack of institutional support within an academic context that emphasised high levels of learner autonomy; all of which was reinforced by a generalised lack of confidence about whether they had the potential to succeed during and after university.

Many of those who acknowledged that they were struggling academically felt that this was compounded by a lack of support from the university. Indeed, a dominant theme that has emerged throughout the study is the desire on the part of the vast majority of students for a greater degree of contact with, and support from, teaching staff.  
(Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003, p. 610)

This research, nonetheless also reported that studying in a newer university where there was a higher composition of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds has a potentially strong beneficial impact on students' sense of integration as a result of shared experiences and challenges. Not only does this provide more in the way of support mechanisms, but also the sense that their own existing cultural habitus is not too misaligned with the prevailing institutional habitus of their university. More recent research has further explored the variance in non-traditional students' responses in order to identify differences amongst learners whose experiences of higher education are often depicted in largely similar ways. The problems with adopting a so-called 'single species' approach to non-traditional students had been identified some time ago (see James, 1995), the main criticism concerning lumping together students' experiences and overly caricaturing them as representing a single cultural entity.

Research by Crozier et al (2008) very much illustrated this points, demonstrating that while some non-traditional students experience the typical struggles identified in previous research, others 'discover themselves' and undergo a discernible process of educational and cultural emancipation. Students, for example, who succeed in largely middle class environments and whose aspirations are driven towards acquiring the middle class values and success models of more prestigious universities, may be more adept at integrating into them. This may also be the case for students in newer, less prestigious universities, although as Crozier et al's research shows, the institutional context can mediate strongly the experience and how much external pressures come to bear on students' progression and retention prospects.

## **Conclusions**

This report has illustrated the major changes that have taken place in the English higher education system over the past half a century, which have had major implications for the nature of access to higher education. We can see that some significant progress has been made in terms of more students entering higher education and from a somewhat broader demographic profile. This, in part, is attributable to a combination of factors, not least the sheer increase in the number of HEIs offering degree-level programmes, the new flexible programmes and study arrangements open to less traditional students (which includes part-time study, distance learning and degree programmes studied in colleges), as well as active policy initiatives that encourage more to be done to include students who might have hitherto been denied access to higher education or considered it not to be a viable pathway. State-level commitment towards increasing participation rates have been consistent over the past five decades, although this has been accompanied by more explicitly market-based reforms that have placed financial responsibility more in the hands of individual learners and their families.

At one level, the expansion of higher education in England over time reflects positively on what has been narrowing of the gap in participation between different social groups in England, although there are still some very discernible gaps in participation on this basis.

Demand for higher education continues in England and other countries of the UK, mainly as it is seen as a principle route to better-paid and more rewarding forms of future employment. This demand is driven mainly by the English middle classes whose children constitute the majority of participants in higher education. These students have been primed for attending higher education from an early stage in their educational careers; and this has been reinforced by higher overall levels of earlier educational attainment, particularly at GCSE and A-level, which are the core entrance requirements to higher education. Demand for this group of student shows little sign of diminishing, although increasingly at stake is the 'type' of institution that students seek to enter: the levels of applications for prestigious English universities are well beyond what they can accept and so competition to enter them remain intense. This, in turn, places considerable power in the hands of institutions in terms of deciding which student they wish to accept as well as the criteria they use for acceptance.

The continued access challenge appears to stem largely from the supply side, mainly in terms of the continued lower relative demand for higher education amongst lower socio-economic groups, which is also reinforced by lower patterns of earlier educational achievement. Moreover, students from lower socio-economic group who do participate are far less likely to enter prestigious universities. But there are also major implications in terms of what higher education institutions put in place to facilitate better access for such groups of learners. More significantly, how they can break down long-standing cultural divides between themselves and groups of learners who have sat on the margins of entry to these institutions. This feeds through to many institutions' own access and admission policies and the extent to which they can adopt more flexible criteria when considering diverse groups of learners. The evidence suggests that in the context of growing demand for high-entry higher education and growing inter and intra-class competition for the best and most desired form of positional goods – namely elite higher education credentials – we may be some way off towards achieving more equal patterns of participation and subsequent outcomes.

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